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Savage Acts: Wars, Fairs and Empire. American Social History.

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<cite>Savage Acts</cite> is an important and timely addition to the educational multimedia resources available for classes in American Studies, Ethnic Studies, and U.S. History. In a quick thirty minutes, it demonstrates the interaction between the United States' creation of an overseas empire at the turn of the century and the accompanying changes in domestic culture expressed in the major World Fairs held from 1893 to 1904. The video is part of a series building on the American Social History Project's earlier two-volume textbook (New York: Pantheon, 1989, 1992) and CD-ROM (Irvington, N.Y.: The Voyager Co., 1993), both entitled <cite>Who Built America?</cite> <p> The video tells the story of the country's shift from expansion across the continent justified by a sense of manifest destiny to the creation of an overseas empire and the new concepts of national and racial mission that supported it. Responding to both a new wave of European imperialism and domestic problems cause by rapid industrialization, the United States declared war on Spain after the explosion on the battleship "Maine" in Havana Harbor. Although the war was ostensibly fought to "free Cuba", the first battle took place in Manila Bay. The decision to annex the Philippines and the resulting three-year Philippine-American War (1899-1902) is given more attention than the three-month "splendid little war" with Spain. The war with Spain created heroes and symbols of national power and greatness, the war in the Philippines divided the nation as the new policy of "imperialism" was debated by citizens' groups, politicians, and soldiers. <p> Beginning with the Colombian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893, the world's fairs promoted globalization, world trade, and a national identity that supported overseas expansion. They highlighted the country's industrial growth at a time when the frontier was declared closed, and drew a sharp contrast between the "progress" and "civilization" of the United States and the "savage" and "primitive" peoples from other countries who were classified into racial "types" and put on display in midway exhibits of "Darkest Africa" and "Mysterious Asia." At the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, the Philippines exhibit was the largest and most popular midway attraction. Decorated with American flags, it celebrated the newly consolidated empire, displaying, in the words of a contemporary review, "savages made by American methods into civilized workers." <p> Of course a thirty-minute format does not allow the full stories of the wars or the fairs to be told, but the film makes the connections between the two remarkably clear. It does this by shifting back and forth between the war in the Philippines, domestic reaction to it, and the fairs. The contrasts presented are striking. For example, quotations from Philippine President Emilio Aguinaldo's plan for the establishment of an independent Philippine government are followed by McKinley's famous account of his decision to annex the Philippines to "educate, uplift and Christianize" the Filipinos. Photographs of Filipino leaders and of Filipino citizens reading newspapers in Manila cafes are contrasted with contemporary editorial cartoons published in the United States that consistently portrayed the Filipinos as children needing guidance from a benevolent Uncle Sam. Similar images of the Filipinos were presented at the world's fairs. Using archival film, photographs, and images from contemporary publications such as <cite>Chicago Times Portfolio of Midway Types</cite>, the video examines the use of contemporary views of racial hierarchy to establish new concepts of national identity and mission. "Viewing man in his primitive state–black, half-clad–it occurs to you why you are the only race not on exhibition," one visitor relates. "The exhibit is for you and you are the crowning glory of it all." Another visitor realizes that "if you were

not an American you would be a savage of that type." <p> The video makes clear, though, that the United States was not as white, homogenous, and trouble-free as the fairs seemed to indicate. African American and Native American groups protested their exclusion from the 1893 Chicago fair. Frederick Douglas spoke at the fair to address the issue of racism. Racism within the United States also affected the war in the Philippines. Filipinos made appeals for racial solidarity, calling for African American soldiers to desert the U.S. army. The story of David Fagen, an African American who became a successful general in the Filipino army and whose capture became an obsession to the U.S. military and the press at home, is told briefly here.[1] Within the United States, the African-American Press was also divided on the issues of imperialism and the war. Some opposed the war on the grounds of racial solidarity, while others argued that national patriotism should come first. <p> Throughout most of the video, contemporary texts, still graphics and contemporary film clips are allowed to tell the story, with narration and occasional headlines used primarily for transitions and to mark significant historical events. The debate about imperialism in the United States is told with quotes from an AF of L Trade Union Delegate, Susan B. Anthony, a resolution by the Colored Citizens of Boston, and William Jennings Bryan representing anti-imperialist thought, and by Theodore Roosevelt, Senator Albert J. Beveridge and General Frederick Funston representing the imperialists. The debate about the war within army ranks is demonstrated with powerful quotes from letters written home by soldiers in the field expressing either sympathy for the Filipinos and opposition to the government's policy or racist sentiments about the "hot game" of "killing niggers." The Philippine side of the war is presented with quotations from Aguinaldo, U.S. Envoy to the United States Felipe Agoncillo, and the Filipino Central Committee that operated throughout the war from offices in Hong Kong and Toronto. The impact of the fairs is presented with quotes from contemporary guidebooks and letters written by visitors to the fairs. <p> The historical advisors for the video have produced some of the most important works related to its subject. Among these are Robert W. Rydell, <cite>All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916</cite> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., <cite>Cultures of United States Imperialism</cite> (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); and Marilyn B. Young, <cite>The Rhetoric of Empire: American China Policy, 1895-1901</cite> (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968). Oscar V. Campomanes co-edited and contributed the "Afterward" to the special Spring 1995 issue of <cite>Critical Mass: A Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism</cite> on U.S. Filipino Literature and Culture; and Roy Rosenzweig co-authored the American Social History Project's CD-ROM. Pennee Bender, who wrote the script, and the other directors of <cite>Savage Acts</cite> are to be congratulated for producing a video that makes its own contribution within this field by combining the wars and fairs more closely and thereby bringing the interaction between foreign policy and domestic culture into sharper focus. <p> Unlike the American Social History Project's earlier textbook and CD-ROM that were designed for individual use, this video is ideal for in-class use. Its 30-minute format provides plenty of time for discussion, and its attention to both the wars and the fairs will undoubtedly make it a useful supplement to assigned readings in classes dealing with U.S. culture, U.S. history, race and ethnicity, and nationalism. People looking for diplomatic history will not find it here, but that is the easiest resource to find on this era. Instead, <cite>Savage Acts</cite> focuses on the cultural ramifications of turn-of-the-century foreign policy, a subject that is rarely represented even in specialized studies. <p> Philippine Commissioner Vicente Nepomuceno is allowed to give the last statement of the film, and it highlights what may be an unintentional benefit of the video. Commenting on the portrayal of Filipinos as savages at the 1904 fair, he says: "It was never intended that the true advancement be disclosed. The impression has gone abroad that we are barbarians [...] and no matter how long we stay here we cannot convince the public to the contrary." Today, this statement has a more profound meaning than it did in 1904. Filipinos are now the seventh-largest racial or national group in the United States, ranking just behind Chinese in the 1990 census as the second-largest Asian American group. They are also the fastest growing Asian group and are expected to outnumber Chinese before the next full census is taken. While the video is an important resource for understanding the creation of racial stereotypes within the United States more generally, it is especially useful for understanding the social history of white American-Filipino American relations. Those relations essentially began in 1898 when, as Finley Peter Dunne's "Mr. Dooley" put it, the people of the United States first learned whether the Philippines "were islands or canned goods." Numerous recent studies have argued that "whiteness" and "blackness" are inextricably connected in American culture.[2] This video argues that the concept of U.S. national mission developed at the turn of the century (an "imperial whiteness") was

inextricably connected to how Filipinos were defined. Both the increasing prominence of Filipinos in American society and the approaching centennials of the Philippine Revolution and the Philippine-American War make this aspect of the video especially timely. <p> Notes: <p> [1]. See "David Fagen: An Afro-American Rebel in the Philippines, 1899-1901," <cite>Pacific Historical Review</cite> 44 (Feb. 1975): 68-83. <p> [2]. See especially Shelley Fisher Fishkin's review, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness': Remapping American Culture," <cite>American Quarterly</cite> 47 (Sept. 1995): 428-66.